

# a slice of nature

Natural flavours, seasonal menus and low-heat cooking... Eco-awareness is sweeping through the world and onto your plate. **SUDI PIGOTT** reports on the top culinary trend reinforcing the link between the earth and the table.

It's one of my top foodie memories. Danish superchef Rene Redzepi, one of the leading lights of the culinary galaxy, is crouched along a path halfway up the Collio hills in deepest Friuli-Venezia Giulia in north-eastern Italy. It is bitterly cold but the chef is oblivious to the chill as he forages in the long grass. He holds up a type of chickweed, exclaiming excitedly that he's found a tangy new variety of the wild herb, and within seconds half a dozen Michelin-starred chefs (Claude Bosi of UK's Hibiscus, David Chang of New York's Momofuku, Davide Scabin of Italy's Combal.Zero and more) who had all been walking up the hill together to visit an artisan vinegar producer are scrambling and foraging around him like excited school kids on an excursion. Later on, Redzepi's new find is triumphantly showcased in one of the dishes he serves up at a dinner for the team.



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Rene Redzepi, whose restaurant Noma in Copenhagen was named best restaurant in this year's S.Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants awards, is one of the key protagonists in the eco-gastronomy phenomenon. His restaurant champions Nordic produce; his dish, Vegetable Field with Malt Soil and Herbs, recreates nature's bounty on the plate.

That outing, a part of the annual Cook It Raw event, a culinary think-tank held earlier this year and attended by top chefs and food writers, perfectly encapsulates the prevailing mood in the culinary world. Says Redzepi: "It's about nature in the raw. It's about developing an appreciation of what the French call 'terroir' or what I call 'the soul of a place' and creating dishes which evoke the 'terroir' on the plate."

## edible landscape

The winds of change are blowing through the foodie universe. Molecular gastronomy is passe. Eco-gastronomy is in. High-tech gadget-heavy kitchen wizardry is making way for simple cooking and a heightened sensitivity to nature and the seasons. The buzzwords emanating from top kitchens are 'supernatural' (the natural flavours of ingredients perfectly showcased with minimal manipulation), 'ultra-seasonal' (ingredients served at their peak freshness which may be just for a few weeks in the year) and 'mi-cuit' (barely cooked, as the use of energy in the kitchen is reassessed). You're more likely to see these back-to-basics chefs wandering around forests and peering into streams than surrounded by gadgets in the kitchen. >>

But as au naturel guru Redzepi puts it: "It's not a question of merely getting back to nature, but going forward with it too."

On a recent visit to his chic and relaxed quayside restaurant Noma in Copenhagen, I was served a dish called Oyster and the Sea, a part of their summer menu. A steaming pot arrived at the table. A lift of the lid and out puffed the fragrance of the ocean. Delving into the fragrant liquid, I spooned up edible seaweed (picked from the beach that same morning), herbs and lightly steamed Limfjorden oysters in their shells. It was the closest I had ever come to a beach without actually being on one.

Another surprise was the Chicken and Egg. A sizzling-hot cast iron plate was placed on the table. Under it was another plate scattered with hay, which concealed a freshly laid egg. You cook the egg yourself on the hot plate and then place it on a salad of ramsom (wild garlic) and herb shoots. The idea is to complete the cycle of nature by recreating the kind of food the chicken would have fed on.



To finish the dish, a chef brings a ramsom cream sauce to the table.

Says Redzepi with an impish grin: "By evoking a bucolic, nostalgic experience of discovering a freshly laid egg in a barn, I hope to derive an emotional response in customers as well as giving them a deliciously different dish."

I had another beach-holiday flashback with a dish by chef Jason Atherton



at London's Maze restaurant, part of the Gordon Ramsay group. Atherton served Loch Duart salmon *mi-cuit* with frozen West Mersea oyster cream and a 'seascape' of foraged sea vegetables and oyster leaf, which tasted compellingly of freshly shucked oyster. Atherton's other tongue-in-cheek preparation: muntjac deer served with oats, seeds and grains resembling a forest floor.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Foraging for ingredients at the Cook It Raw event; where Daniel Patterson served a dish with sheep's milk ricotta, hay gelatine, beetroot, radish and herbs; Narisawa presented Evolve

with the Forest, featuring venison, fruit, nuts and chrysanthemum buds; Goosnargh duck, served at Sat Bains' restaurant; Scabin's beef glaze shots with egg yolk, beef broth and truffle, served at Cook It Raw.



Desserts are going super-natural as well. Sicilian patissier Corrado Assenza of Caffè Sicilia in Noto, Italy, specialises in desserts that "capture the perfumes of the landscape". A delicious dessert plate at his cafe offers goat's curd, fresh wheat cooked with orange blossom honey, mandarins and mint in an aromatic sugar syrup with green pistachios and Noto almond blossom. One dessert I'll never forget was served by Albert Adria (brother of Ferran Adria of El Bulli) at the Cook It Raw event in Collio: translucent petal-like apple slices intricately arranged like a rose with miniscule shimmery 'spherified' droplets of rose water; a witty homage to the rare Gorizia rose radicchio, which can only be cultivated in a micro-region in the heart of Collio.

culinary vocabulary, with *kaiseki* dining the pinnacle of culinary artistry. *Kaiseki* is a traditional ultra-refined, multi-course culinary ritual based on a devout appreciation of seasonal ingredients at their point of peak freshness.

You can experience its international influence at chef Mauro Colagreco's charming Mirazur restaurant in Menton, in the French Riviera. Try their small but perfectly formed courses, like the crudo of San Remo prawns, which are caught during a short season at one particular fishing village and served in a Menton lemon and lime dressing with freshly picked borage and oxalis flowers. In keeping with its eco-sustainable approach to dining, vegetables and herbs take a far more prominent

place on the plate than in conventional gourmet restaurants.

In the UK, Sat Bains of the eponymous Nottingham-based restaurant is another *kaiseki* acolyte as is Pascal Barbot of L'Astrance in Paris. Their multi-course tasting menus evolve with the seasons. The dishes on Bains' Spring degustation menu all feature a raw element – momentarily cooked leeks with a wild leek puree and hazelnut emulsion; scallops, raw on one side and just caramelised on the other; milk-fed veal partnered with raw button mushrooms...

To experience *kaiseki* in its homebase of Japan, seat yourself on the tatami mats at chef Yoshihiro Murata's Kikunoi restaurant in Kyoto. Murata is the high priest of *kaiseki* and his menu is a >>



## in tune with the seasons

Given the impulse of this movement, it's not surprising that more chefs are looking to Japan for inspiration. Eating according to the seasons, super-fresh ingredients, picture-perfect presentations and minimal cooking are central to their





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Crayfish cannelloni by Michelin-starred chef John Campbell; the chef at work – his upcoming restaurant at Coworth Park hotel will feature a carbon-neutral energy supply; Alain Ducasse's new signature Cookpot dish with local vegetables.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PHOTOLIBRARY / BOB NOTO

**contact details**

- [www.cookitraw.org](http://www.cookitraw.org)
- [www.noma.dk](http://www.noma.dk)
- [www.gordonramsay.com/maze](http://www.gordonramsay.com/maze)
- Caffe Sicilia, 125 Corso Vittorio Emanuele, Tel: 39 931 835 013
- [www.mirazur.fr](http://www.mirazur.fr)
- [www.restaurantsatbains.com](http://www.restaurantsatbains.com)
- L'Astrance, 4 Rue Beethoven, Tel: 33 1 4050 8440
- [kikunoi.jp/english](http://kikunoi.jp/english)
- [www.narisawa-yoshihiro.com](http://www.narisawa-yoshihiro.com)
- [www.hibiscusrestaurant.co.uk](http://www.hibiscusrestaurant.co.uk)
- [www.coirestaurant.com](http://www.coirestaurant.com)
- [www.coworthpark.com](http://www.coworthpark.com)
- [www.alain-ducasse.com](http://www.alain-ducasse.com)

homage to the season and the locale: fresh sea urchin roe tofu and *hamo* (pike conger) briefly blanched and served with an *ume* (plum) sake and *mirin* (sweet rice wine) sauce – the menu even details the provenance of the ingredients. For a more contemporary take on *kaiseki*, head to Yoshihiro Narisawa's Les Creations de Narisawa in Tokyo. Delicately fried baby *ayu* (sweet fish) from mountain streams are paired with edible cherry blossoms, presented as if the fish were still swimming. Says Narisawa: "I want to capture the scenery so the guests fall under the spell of the season and find its beauty. And we must cherish the environment that produces such exceptional ingredients."

For a look at a post-modern kitchen, go behind the scenes at Coworth Park country house hotel, a part of the luxury brand Dorchester Collection, when it opens this summer. Chef John Campbell is setting up the kitchen with an entirely carbon-neutral energy supply. Explains Campbell: "It's all about taking the heat out of the kitchen by using less conventional ways to cook." Multiple water baths for *sous-vide* cooking take the place of high-octane burners, and dishes are cooked at lower temperatures to maximise flavour and maintain the nutrients of the produce. (In *sous-vide* cooking, ingredients are put into airtight bags and slow-cooked in hot water.)

At legendary chef-restaurateur Alain Ducasse's Le Louis XV in Monaco, earth-friendly trends come together in his new signature Cookpot dish, which Ducasse has introduced across all his restaurants. Each head chef improvises with seven seasonal vegetables that epitomise the local terroir, cooked at a low temperature in a stunning porcelain dish specially made by Pillivuyt. On the day I was there, chef Franck Cerutti of Le Louis XV had selected from Nice's Cours Saleya market tiny carrots, baby turnips, violet artichoke hearts, young leeks, the first summer peas, broad beans and lettuce hearts, gently braised with slivers of *jamon* (ham) Iberico. Says Ducasse, whose Le Louis XV restaurant has focused on elevating the produce of the Cote d'Azur: "I am delighted chefs are changing the script and promoting the simple truth of seasons." ☒

**cool kitchens**

Eco-awareness is high on the culinary agenda, and in that spirit kitchens are reassessing their use of technology and turning off some of the heat. Claude Bosi of Mayfair's Hibiscus restaurant says: "We don't have to reject technology, but there are things that you don't have to do." One of the things he stays away from is foam.

Traditional cooking methods are also making a comeback. Daniel Patterson of San Francisco's Coi uses salting, pickling and drying "to accentuate the pure flavours of raw ingredients and serve them as close to nature as possible". His current headline dish is young carrots roasted in hay and served with dried radish powder and shaved pecorino.

